Collaborative Session

Stepping to an “I’m Out” Beat: Faith Formation of African American Adolescents

Dr. Carmichael Crutchfield, Memphis Theological Seminary
Dr. Denise Janssen, Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, Virginia Union University

This session grows from a study addressing adolescent faith formation in the black church. Presenters seek to excavate the historic role of the black church in educating African Americans, among its other crucial roles. Set in this context, presenters will relate these historic functions to findings from focus groups with African American adolescents now active in black churches. An interactive process then invites participants to follow a similar path to understanding religious engagement in context of the broader culture’s social structures.

Session Outline

I. Open with a question about a key adult in participants’ lives as adolescents
II. Setting the context: the black church and adolescence
III. Mini-presentation about focus group findings to this point
IV. Activity to invite reflection and awareness – role play in small groups
V. Exploration of ways to support and foster faith formation in African American adolescents and young adults

Methodology Undergirding this Research

Beyond relevant theories in the field of youth ministry and Christian education, the presenters will draw upon original ethnographic research based in the black church context as a foundation for this presentation. It will further engage the historic black church practices of talking, teaching and testifying as strong methods of faith formation in adolescents. The following theories also serve to inform research analysis and presentation of findings.

- Attachment Theory - Using research developed by John Bowlby a specific area of attachment will be addressed in reference to mothers. Bowlby’s research considers the importance of the child’s relationship with their mother in terms of their social, emotional, and cognitive development. The presenters will be attentive to the findings from focus groups that might relate to attachment theory.

- Social Exchange Theory - Social exchange theory proposes that social behavior is the result of an exchange process. The purpose of this exchange is to maximize benefits and minimize costs. According to this theory, developed by sociologist George Homans, people weigh the potential benefits and risks of social relationships. When the risks outweigh the rewards, people will terminate or abandon that relationship. The presenters will speak to findings resulting from focus groups relative to Social Exchange Theory, where applicable.

- Social Learning Theory - The work first put forward in the 1960’s and 1970’s by Albert Bandura will be used as the presenters glean from focus groups how African American adolescents learn and are formed in the faith by observing models. A serious inquiry will be put forth to determine how faith formation takes places through relationships of African American Adolescents with influential models. Bandura suggests some of these
models in society come from parents, relatives, characters on TV, friends, peers and teachers. The presenters will give attention to how participants in focus groups relate to models and how they are involved in faith formation.

Select Bibliographic Resources

Dean, Kenda Creasy. How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education – If We Let It (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).